

Message Text

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ACTION AF-06

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R 070857Z MAR 75

FM AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3517

INFO AMCONSUL ASMARA

AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

AMEMBASSY NAIROBI

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY ROME

USCINCEUR VAIHINGEN GERMANY

C O N F I D E N T I A L ADDIS ABABA 2700

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: EAGR ECON MOPS PINS PINT PGOV ET

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIAN LAND REFORM: INITIAL THOUGHTS

REFS: (A) ADDIS 2524 AND 2616;

(B) LONDON FBIS 041250Z MAR 75; (C) ROME 3172

SUMMARY. THIS MESSAGE SETS FORTH THE EMBASSY'S INITIAL THOUGHTS ON THE RURAL LAND NATIONALIZATION PROCLAMATION OF MARCH 4. IT FOCUSES ON THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT INTO WHICH THAT PROCLAMATION FALLS, AND CONCLUDES THAT IN THE ABSENCE OF ADEQUATE PREPARATIONS AND ARRANGEMENTS, AND NOTWITHSTANDING "DIRG" GAINS FROM THE PROMULGATION OF THIS MEASURE WITH THE REFORM-MINDED AND AMONG THE DISPOSSESSED, THIS PROCLAMATION COULD EASILY RESULT IN UNCONTROL-
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LABLE STRIFE INVOLVING PEASANTS, LANDOWNERS, THE RURAL PETTY

BOURGEOIS AND THE EPMG SUCH AS TO RAISE QUESTIONS AS TO ETHIOPIA'S
ULTIMATE TERRITORIAL AND GOVERNMENTAL VIABILITY. END SUMMARY.

1. ASSUME DEPARTMENT HAS BY NOW RECEIVED, THROUGH FBIS BROADCAST
TEXT OF RURAL LAND NATIONALIZATION PROCLAMATION OF MARCH 4.
FULL TEXT AS PRINTED IN ETHIOPIAN PRESS BEING POUCHED DEPARTMENT
TODAY.

2. IN THIS VERY EARLY STAGE OF THE LAND REFORM PROCESS, EMBASSY
OFFERS FOLLOWING TENTATIVE THOUGHTS ON SELECTED IMPLICATIONS THIS
PROCLAMATION:

A) UNLIKE CERTAIN DELICATE DECISIONS THUS FAR TAKEN BY THE
"DIRG" WHICH CAN BE COUNTERMANDED OR WITHDRAWN, THIS LAND REFORM
PROCLAMATION IS LIKELY RELEASING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FORCES
WHICH WILL PROVE IRREVERSIBLE AND MAY BECOME UNCONTROLLABLE. WE
WOULD EXPECT THE IMPACT OF THIS PROCLAMATION TO BECOME APPARENT
ONLY RELATIVELY GRADUALLY AS ITS MEANING PENETRATES THE COUNTRY-
SIDE WHERE MOST ETHIOPIANS LIVE AND WORK. THIS DOES NOT MEAN, OF
COURSE, THAT WE WILL HAVE TO WAIT LONG FOR INITIAL LOCALIZED
REACTIONS WHICH, ACCORDING TO CURRENT REPORTS REACHING US, MAY
ALREADY BE TAKING PLACE.

B) AS ROME CORRECTLY POINTS OUT, THERE IS NO GOVERNMENT
STRUCTURE CAPABLE OF ASSUMING THE TITANIC TASK OF CHANNELING
AND CONTROLLING THE FORCES ABOVE REFERRED TO WHICH ARE NOW BEING
RELEASED. ALTHOUGH THE SUBJECT OF LAND REFORM HAS BEEN STUDIED
IN THIS COUNTRY FOR MANY YEARS AND GREAT EXPERTISE HAS BEEN
BROUGHT TO BEAR ON ITS NEXUS OF PROBLEMS DURING THAT TIME, THE
PROCLAMATION PROMULGATED ON MARCH 4 IS RADICAL IN ITS UNIFORM
TREATMENT OF ALL LAND TENURE SYSTEMS (WHICH VARY GREATLY FROM
AREA TO AREA) AND ITS APPLICATION TO ALL LANDHOLDERS FROM THE
LARGEST TO THE SMALLEST. IT IS ALSO NOTEWORTHY THAT LAND REFORM
PRECEDED THE ESTABLISHMENT/IMPLANTATION OF ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGE-
MENTS AND STRUCTURES INTENDED TO DEAL WITH ITS CONSEQUENCES AND
AFFECTS, ALTHOUGH LOCAL GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS HAVE BEEN
STRENGTHENED RECENTLY BY THE ASSIGNMENT OF ADDITIONAL QUALIFIED
PERSONNEL FROM OTHER MINISTRIES. THIS REALITY THUS THROWS THE
INSTITUTIONAL DIFFICULTY CREATED BY THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTIONARY
PROCESSES (CF ADDIS A-244 OF DECEMBER 1974) ONCE MORE INTO SHARP
RELIEF.

C) WHAT THE "DIRG" HAS ALREADY DONE IN DISCREDITING THE
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POLITICAL INSTRUMENTALITIES IN THE CAPITAL THOUGH WHICH THE CROWN
USED TO REIGN AND RULE WITHOUT SUPPLANTING THEM WITH ADEQUATE
SUBSTITUTES, THIS PROCLAMATION NOW RISKS DOING TO THE GRASS ROOTS
INSTITUTIONS AND ELITES DESCRIBED SO WELL IN THE COHEN STUDY
("LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IN ETHIOPIA" 1974). THESE HAVE BEEN
AT THE BASE OF THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE UPON WHICH HAILE SELASSIE'S
GOVERNMENT WAS BUILT.

D) WE THUS HAVE A DECISION WHICH BEARS THE HEAVY IMPRINT OF

IDEOLOGY TAKEN AT THE SUMMIT BY THE "DIRG", APPARENTLY WITHOUT MUCH REFERENCE, AT LEAST AS TO TIMING, TO THE CABINET OR THE ADMINISTRATION AND CERTAINLY AGAINST THE OPPOSITION OF MANY WHO FELT THAT THE NATION'S PLATE WAS ALREADY FILLED TO OVERFLOWING. THIS DECISION, MOREOVER, IS ONE WHICH - - IN THE NAME OF A NEEDED REFORM - - ATTACKS SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL-TRADITIONAL SYSTEMS WHICH HAD GIVEN THE ETHIOPIAN COUNTRYSIDE A DEGREE OF STABILITY DURING THE YEAR OF TURMOIL IN THIS COUNTRY'S CENTRAL (MODERN) GOVERNMENTAL SYSTEM SINCE THE FALL OF THE AKLILU HABTE WOLDE CABINET. GIVEN THE STRUCTURAL DEFICIENCY DESCRIBED, THE "DIRG'S" LIKELY RELATED INABILITY TO CHANNEL OR CONTROL THE PASSIONS AND APPETITIES THUS LOOSED, AS WELL AS ITS PUBLISHED STATEMENTS ON THE SUBJECT, ONE IS DRIVEN TOWARDS THE ESTIMATE THAT THE "DIRG" MAY KNOWINGLY HAVE DECIDED TO STIMULATE CLASS CONFLICT TO ITS OWN ENDS. IN SUCH A CONFLICT THE TRADITIONAL RURAL ELITES (IN COHEN'S SENSE OF THAT TERM) HAVE NOW BEEN IDENTIFIED AS A SANCTIONED TARGET. THIS IMPRESSION IS STRENGTHENED BY REPORTS REACHING US THAT THE "DIRG" MAY HAVE ISSUED INSTRUCTIONS TO THE ARMED FORCES TO MAKE WEAPONS AVAILABLE TO FARMERS IN AREAS IN WHICH LANDHOLDERS AND OTHERS MIGHT BE INCLINED TO RESIST THEIR EXPROPRIATIONS BY FORCE.

E) ASSUMING FOR THE MOMENT THAT ETHIOPIA IS VERY FORTUNATE AND THAT CURRENT PROCESSES WILL CONTINUE TO TAKE A LARGELY "POLITICAL" COURSE, WE MIGHT ANTICIPATE AT MINIMUM THE GRADUAL BUT ACCELERATING EROSION OF THE STANDING AND INFLUENCE OF THIS FORMERLY PRIVILEGED CLASS. OVERALL, ASSUMING SUPPORT FOR THE REFORM AMONG TENANTS (ALTHOUGH IN 1968 TENANTS IN GOJJAM ALSO OPPOSED THE THEN IEG'S EFFORTS AT REFORM), WE SEE THE SMALL HOLDERS, INCLUDING PEASANTS, VETS, ABSENTEE INVESTORS, ETC. AS THE KEY GROUPS WHOSE ATTITUDE SEEMS LIKELY TO COMMAND REACTIONS TO THIS MEASURE IN LARGE AND SIGNIFICANT AREAS OF THE COUNTRY. IF ETHIOPIA PROVES UNLUCKY, THE PROCLAMATION COULD, OF COURSE, LEAD TO A SITUATION OF WIDE-SPREAD SOCIAL AND STRUCTURAL BREAKDOWN IN CERTAIN REGIONS IF NOT IN OTHERS, WITH THE INHERENT RISK OF VIOLENCE AND CHAOS.

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F) THIS MESSAGE DELIBERATELY SIDESTEPS THE LEGION OF OTHER PERTINENT QUESTIONS POSED BY THE PROMULGATION OF THIS DOCUMENT, VIZ., THE IMPACT AND EFFECTS OF THE SUDDEN SHIFT IN INCENTIVES FROM HAVES TO HAVE-NOTS, E.G. THE GOVERNMENT'S CAPABILITY TO COMMAND CAPITAL AND MOBILIZE CREDIT FOR THE LATTER; THE REACTIONS OF A SUDDENLY FINANCIALLY INSECURE CHURCH AND CLERGY; THE OPERATION (SOCIAL AND POLITICAL) OF THE INHERITANCE CLAUSES; THE PERCEPTION OF AMHARA COLONIZATION WHICH CAN EASILY BE READ INTO SOME OF ITS PROVISIONS, E.G. THE (AMHARA-DOMINATED) CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S CONTROL OF ALL LAND; ITS EFFECT UPON THE RELIABILITY OF THE ARMED FORCES' PROPERTIED CADRES (AND HENCE UPON THE FUTURE OF THE "DIRG" ITSELF); THE OBEDIENCE OF AN URBAN GOVERNMENTAL BUREAUCRACY/LOWER MIDDLE CLASS WHICH HAD INVESTED HEAVILY IN LAND; AND (ON THE OTHER HAND) THE SUPPORT THE EPMG HAS GAINED BY THIS PROCLAMATION AMONG STUDENTS, AT LEAST SOME AND PERHAPS MANY PEASANTS, AND THE MORE

IDEOLOGICALLY INCLINED. TIME AND DEVELOPMENTS WILL HAVE TO SHED
FURTHER LIGHT ON THESE.

G) LAND REFORM IN ETHIOPIA, FINALLY, WAS ESSENTIAL. NOTHING
SAID HERE IS INTENDED TO SUGGEST A PERCEPTION FAVORING THE
PRESERVATION OF OUTDATED PRIVILEGE AND REACTIONARY EXPLOITATION.
HOWEVER, THE ONE POINT WHICH STRIKES US AS CRUCIAL AT THIS STAGE
IS SIMPLY THAT IN THE ABSENCE OF ADEQUATE PREPARATIONS AND
ARRANGEMENTS (PARTICULARLY INSTITUTIONAL), THIS PROCLAMATION
COULD EASILY RESULT IN UNCONTROLLABLE STRIFE INVOLVING PEASANTS,
LANDOWNERS, THE RURAL PETTY BOURGEOIS AND THE EPMG, WITH CURRENTLY
UNFORESEEABLE EFFECTS UPON PRESENT DAY ETHIOPIA'S ULTIMATE
POLITICAL VIABILITY.
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